











## In this issue:

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## Welcome to Natural Health Review Issue 17.

This month we have a number of studies in older people showing the benefits of dietary calcium, vitamin B and stress reduction. There is also encouraging news for patients with Alzheimer's disease. For women, pine bark extract can help with period pain. I hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to receiving your feedback.

Kind Regards,

**Dr Shaun Holt**

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## Fish oils and cognitive performance in older people

### The facts:

- High intake of fish oils didn't protect against age-related cognitive decline in a study of 302 people aged 65 years or older.
- Participants were randomly assigned to take high- or low-dose omega-3 fatty acids or placebo for 26 weeks.
- Despite excellent compliance to the regimens, changes in cognitive performance seen in the 2 fish oil groups after 6 months were no different from those seen with placebo.



### Dr Shaun Holt:

It's not often that we include negative studies, but this one illustrates an important point. Previous studies have found an improvement in cognitive function in those taking omega-3 fish oils, but this large study did not - so does it help or not? The answer almost certainly lies in the duration that the omega-3 fish oil is taken for. In this study it was 6 months, which I suspect is simply not long enough. Other studies have looked at cognition changes over 3 to 5 years and so the message is that omega-3 fish oil is not a short-term fix for memory and attention problems, but may help if taken consistently for a long time.

<http://www.neurology.org/cgi/content/abstract/71/6/430>

## When it's winter outside Prepare yourself inside.



Vitamins are supplementary to and not a replacement for a balanced diet. Always read the label and use only as directed.

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## Safety of ginseng extract in children with upper respiratory tract infections

### The facts:

- Standard doses of ginseng were well tolerated in Canadian children with upper respiratory tract infection (URTI), a very common childhood illness.
- 46 children aged between 3 and 12 years who had an URTI during winter were randomised to take standard- or low-dose ginseng or placebo.
- Both dosages of ginseng were well tolerated, with the frequency of adverse events similar to that reported with placebo.

### Dr Shaun Holt:

I've included this study as it does a great job of addressing an aspect of natural health that is often neglected, namely the safety of the product and its side effects. This was a small study but large enough to show that both a low and standard dose of ginseng extract were safe and had few side effects in children. Now that this has been established, efficacy studies to demonstrate whether it can be used to treat upper respiratory tract infections in children can be undertaken.

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/122/2/e402>

## More calcium may lead to fewer strokes: study

### The facts:

- High dietary calcium intake appears to reduce the risk of stroke, but does not prevent heart disease.
- Over 40,000 healthy middle-aged Japanese men and women completed a food consumption questionnaire before being followed for at least 10 years.
- People who reported high dietary intake of calcium (particularly from dairy food) were found to be at lower risk for stroke than people with low dietary calcium, but the risk of heart disease between groups did not differ.

### Dr Shaun Holt:

This enormous study found a strong correlation between the intake and calcium from dairy products and the risk of having a stroke. We know that calcium can help to reduce blood pressure and that strokes can be caused by high blood pressure, so perhaps that could be the mechanism of action. Having said that, there was no reduction in coronary heart disease with increased dairy calcium and so more work is needed.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1161/STROKEAHA.107.512236>



## MRI confirms the effects of acupuncture

### The facts:

- Acupuncture can be used to stimulate saliva production and reduce xerostomia (dry mouth).
- This study in healthy volunteers used MRI to determine which parts of the brain, if any, were activated after acupuncture at LI-2 (a point commonly used to treat dry mouth).
- MRI revealed that acupuncture at LI-2 caused cortical activation that was directed linked to increases in saliva production

### Dr Shaun Holt:

This could be one of the most important acupuncture studies ever. Acupuncture does not fit the traditional Western models of medicine and disease treatment, but does seem to work for certain conditions, particularly pain and nausea. Acupuncture in the exact spot required to increase saliva production did just that and, incredibly, the nervous system activity involved was picked up on Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans. Acupuncture at the incorrect place did not have these effects, and so this study may be the first to demonstrate that the energy lines that acupuncture supposedly taps into actually do exist.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6882/8/37>



**Independent commentary by Dr Shaun Holt, BPharm (hons), MBChB (hons)**

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## Flavonoids reduce cardiovascular risk

### The facts:

- A review of 133 studies has confirmed that flavonoids found in chocolate and soy protein are beneficial to cardiovascular health.
- Consumption of chocolate led to a reduction in blood pressure, while soy protein (but not other soy products) reduced blood pressure and harmful LDL cholesterol levels.
- Green tea also reduced LDL cholesterol levels but drinking black tea caused blood pressure to increase.



### Dr Shaun Holt:

Flavonoids are a group of over 5,000 substances produced by plants with many health benefits, mostly as a result of their antioxidant activity. The main dietary sources are citrus fruits, green tea, chocolate, wine and ginkgo. This study reviewed over 130 previous studies and found that flavonoids from chocolate, soy protein and tea in particular had good evidence of cardiovascular benefits. Despite all these studies, the authors concluded that many more are needed to answer questions such as how much should be taken in the diet and for how long for health benefits to occur.

<http://www.ajcn.org/cgi/content/abstract/88/1/38>

## Pine bark extract reduces period pain

### The facts:

- The effects of French maritime pine bark extract (Pycnogenol) were investigated in a double-blind study of women with period pain.
- Compared with placebo, pycnogenol 60 mg/day soothed menstrual pain and decreased the need for painkillers.
- The effects of pycnogenol on period pain persisted even after the treatment was stopped.

### Dr Shaun Holt:

Pycnogenol is probably running a close third behind omega-3 fish oil and probiotics as the natural supplement with the most active clinical research programmes at the moment. This large, very well-designed study showed that the pine bark extract helped reduce the amount of painkillers needed for menstrual pain. The tree is a serious pest in parts of South Africa but is one of the most important trees for forestry in some European countries. Pycnogenol is a patented extract, and the protection conferred by this patent will have given the owners of the patent the confidence to invest in clinical research.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18567279>



## Fish oils may improve cognitive function in preschoolers

### The facts:

- Supplementation with docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) 400 mg/day for 4 months improved vocabulary and listening skills in healthy 4-year-old children.
- The children were tested with a battery of cognitive tests before and after treatment and the investigators found a significant association between higher scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (listening and vocabulary) and DHA blood levels.
- No significant improvements were observed in any of the other tests.

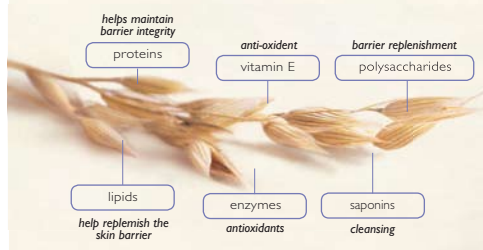
### Dr Shaun Holt:

There have been positive studies on the effects of omega-3 fish oil supplements on babies and on school children, but what about toddlers? This study gave a small amount of evidence of a positive effect with respect to a standard picture and vocabulary test. However, the lack of a strongly positive result may well be due to the study being quite small and of a short duration (only 4 months). This study therefore adds a small amount of evidence to support the general findings of several studies that show benefits for children from taking a fish oil supplement.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0009922807311730>

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## Low vitamin B tied to hip fracture risk

### The facts:

- The association between low vitamin B levels and hip fracture risk was demonstrated in a 4-year study involving over 1000 elderly men and women.
- Patients with high vitamin B12 and B6 levels had less bone loss and were at a lower risk for hip fracture, while those with high homocysteine levels were at a higher risk for hip fracture.
- Low vitamin B levels appear to be a risk factor for decreased bone health, although this does not fully explain the link between homocysteine and hip fractures.

### Dr Shaun Holt:

This study showed that low levels of Vitamin B may increase the likelihood of having osteoporosis and hip fractures. A hip fracture occurs when there is a break in the thighbone (femur) near where it joins the pelvis (the hip joint). Up to a third of elderly people die within a year of a hip fracture, often as a result of a complication of the surgery to repair the fracture. With increasing life expectancy, hip fractures are one of the most important public health problems and simple ways to reduce the risk, such as vitamin supplements, are of huge importance.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1210/jc.2007-2710>

## Seniors: less stress may lower blood pressure and meds

### The facts:

- In a well-designed study, stress management effectively reduced the need for antihypertensive medication in older patients with hypertension.
- 122 patients aged 55 years or older underwent either relaxation response training or lifestyle modification for 8 weeks, after which time those with well-controlled blood pressure (BP) were eligible for supervised withdrawal of antihypertensive treatment.
- Although both groups had similar reductions in BP, more patients in the relaxation response group than the lifestyle modification group eliminated an antihypertensive medication while maintaining adequate BP control.



### Dr Shaun Holt:

Stress management training was shown in this study to not only reduce blood pressure, but also to enable the reduction in dose or even the requirement for some blood pressure-lowering medications. Stress triggers the fight-or-flight response that can increase the blood pressure. This response can also be measured by the reduction in skin temperature that it causes electrical response of the skin...the latter measurement is one part of polygraph devices (lie detectors). There are over 10 stress management techniques, ranging from exercise to deep breathing to listening to certain types of music.

<http://www.liebertonline.com/doi/abs/10.1089/acm.2007.0623>

## Herbal product may improve Alzheimer's Disease symptoms

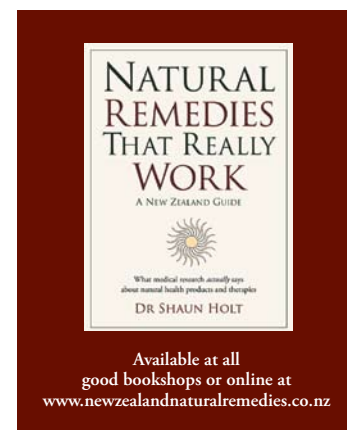
### The facts:

- A review of 6 randomised controlled trials studying the efficacy and safety of the cholinesterase inhibitor Huperzine A in over 400 patients with Alzheimer's disease showed the drug to have some beneficial effects.
- Improvements in general cognitive function, behaviour and functional performance were observed compared with placebo, with no obvious serious adverse events.
- Larger well-designed trials are needed to further assess the effects of Huperzine A.

### Dr Shaun Holt:

This analysis of studies that have looked at the safety and effectiveness of Huperzine A found that it is highly promising as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease. The authors sensibly conclude that large randomised trials are needed. Huperzine A is a naturally occurring extract from a type of fir moss plant and has been used in China to treat a number of conditions for centuries. The mechanism of action is similar to that of current drugs that are used to treat Alzheimer's disease and so, despite the lack of overwhelming evidence, it is something that you might want to consider giving to someone with the condition for whom you are caring.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD005592.pub2>



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